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Teaching Geography in France primary schools using everyday objects and the surrounding environment

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Abstract

This article proposes an innovative approach to teaching geography in French primary schools, based on the use of everyday objects and artefacts found in pupils' immediate environment, both inside and outside the classroom. Focusing on spatial objects and features that are often overlooked because of their ubiquity, this method encourages a new perspective on the surrounding environment. It prompts students to engage with fundamental geographical issues and supports the development of geographical reasoning. The central focus of this process is the activation of language resources, together with the use of tools and methods to collect information and communicate effectively. Finally, this approach promotes a deeper understanding of the world and empowers pupils to take an active role in their local environment when needed.

Keywords: Geography, Artefact, Primary Schools, Curriculum, Learning, Teaching

1. Introduction

French primary school curricula still require pupils to be taught geography. However, for many teachers, teaching geography and for many pupils, learning geography remain problematic. Up to now, this teaching has combined two objectives: to give pupils a common culture and to introduce them to geographical reasoning, based on a series of programmatic proposals, which often follow each other, in an analytical way but with no time for synthesis which could take into the complexity of reality and the organisation of our contemporary society.

The objective of this article is to propose an alternative approach. A proposal that does not seek to build a common culture as such. This common culture, based on a descriptive geography of the major features of France, Europe and the world, could just as well be part of, and complementary to, this proposed teaching of geography at primary school, in an articulated way if necessary or in a very distinct, separate part.

The objective of this proposal is to facilitate pupils' engagement in geographical reasoning based on the objects, artefacts and facilities that surround them, as close to them as possible, in

their everyday lives. This will enable them to question what is closest to them, what they may no longer question because they see it every day, and yet which carries meaning, a geographical meaning, a geographical reading of the world in which everyone, whether they like it or not, is involved.

Prior to the formulation of this proposal, it is first necessary to examine the current state of geography teaching in French primary schools (section 2). Secondly, it is essential to determine the kind of adult we are aiming for, the kind of adult we want to see emerge, and the kind of society in which we want them to flourish (section 3). Section 4 will look at one possible way of going about bringing this adult into being. Section 5 will examine the specific objectives of the proposed geography curriculum in greater detail. The penultimate part (section 6) will address the question of how to examine everyday objects, artefacts and facilities in the classroom with primary school pupils. Furthermore, section 7 will consider the anticipated outcomes and skills that pupils will be expected to develop and attain through this pedagogical approach of learning geography in primary school.

2. The current state of geography teaching in French primary schools

The study of geography has been a component of the French school curriculum since the end of the 19th century, when primary education became compulsory (Lefort, 1992). Until the 1970s, school geography was, in practice, descriptive in terms of teachers' teaching despite the curriculum requiring pupils to engage to explore the world around their classroom, their neighbourhood, their town, etc. (Chevalier and Hugonie, 2007; Philippot and Charpentier, 2016). Since then, however, there has been attempts to make it less so, although the results have not matched the expectations of the curricula, as shown by the initial results of a survey of the ability of pupils at the end of primary and lower secondary school to use geographical language to answer the question of how an island should be developed so that a society can live there (Thémines et al., 2022). And the yet, the most recent curricula, which are structured around the concept of "inhabiting" (Lazarotti, 2006; Paquot, Lussault and Younès, 2007; Stock, 2011; Biaggi, 2015) should have enabled primary school pupils to respond to the aforementioned question using geographical reasoning, language and tools (Thémines et al., 2022).

In light of the aforementioned circumstances, it would seem appropriate to reflect on proposal, since those currently in force in the 2023 programmes are in fact structured in a very linear way, with themes and entries that follow one another, in an analytical and not synthetic way, to enable pupils to observe, question and understand the world around them and to bring out specifically geographical skills to enable them to respond to the questions of the present time.

Given that French primary school teachers are multi-skilled and do not specialise in geography (Philippot and Baillat, 2011; Baillat and Philippot, 2018), it seems ill-advised to offer them programmes that are too difficult to understand and implement (Philippot and Charpentier, 2016) and that take up too much time in preparation (Charpentier, 2018).

The idea would be to start with the most proximal objects, artefacts and facilities that pupils encounter in their daily lives for questioning them. Examples of such questions include: Where do they come from? What are they made of? How were they made? Who made them? Where, and so on. So many simple questions based on the objects, artefacts and facilities of their daily lives, that will enable pupils to start asking geographic questions and, hopefully, to start reasoning geographically (Mérenne-Schoumaker, 2005).

Before embarking on this proposal, which involves utilising everyday objects, artefacts and facilities as a starting point, it seems pertinent to recall the aims of this new approach to the geography curriculum at primary school and to elucidate the underlying rationale.

3. Proposed programmes, but for which future adults? For what kind of society?

We believe that school programmes have a purpose. This purpose is not simply to enable pupils to progress from one level to the next, or to obtain qualifications or diplomas. It encompasses above all the intellectual development of pupils and their integration into present and future society (Chateau, 1968; Perrenoud, 1996; Freire, 2019). The first of these aims is to facilitate the integration of pupils from diverse social, economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds into a shared linguistic environment. In the case of French education, this entails learning the French language. The objective of this common language is to enable everyone to communicate, to understand with others, to make themselves understood and to learn what they do not already know (Bentolila, 2000). In addition to the common language shared by pupils, it is postulated that the aim of school curricula is to enable pupils to question the world around them from different perspectives, using words, specific vocabularies, and questions that are specific to different school disciplines (themselves linked to university and academic disciplines that are often homonymous, such as geography, history, etc., which give them scientific validity) but also methods and tools to give them meaning and intelligibility based on the expected productions. Incidentally, we could think of a school without a curriculum, a school based on the desires, needs and interest expressed by pupils in certain issues, and so on (Illich, 1976). But we postulate that curricula do have a purpose, and not the least of which is to offer pupils knowledge and skills that today's society considers to be useful for them and important for the society around them, even if they may not initially be interested in them. To put it another way, we postulate that these school programmes are in their interest for their own sake; an interest of which they may not be aware, since they are entering society and this society pre-exists them (Charlot, 1999). Given that every child is born into a pre-existing society, his or her education, socialisation and upbringing should enable him or her to enter that society on an equal footing and with confidence (Durkheim, 1922).

However, this instruction, socialisation and education for today's society must also be viewed from the perspective of anticipating, projecting into the future, given that today, more than ever before, everyone is confronted with very rapid change (Ferry, 2014), a complex world (Morin, 1999b, 2005), which is now globalised (Gélinas, 2007), interconnected (Perez and Sokolov, 2020). A world that can be considered as a system (De Rosnay, 1975; Morin, 2005; Yatchinovsky, 2018).

In the world in which we live today, each person is both an individual; an individuality inscribed in a personal trajectory (Rabachou, 2017), and a member, a subject, an actor in a society in which he is inscribed, linked to people other than himself (Lévinas in Hocquard, 1996), other societies (Barthelemy, 2023) which may be proximate or remote geographically, culturally, linguistically, socially, economically, and so on.

As a matter of fact, we believe that today's children, who will be tomorrow's adults, must be given the opportunity to look beyond the obvious in the world around them. This was the argument put by Léna and Quéré in 2005 on science teaching in schools. For these authors, it is necessary for everyone to "[...] go beyond the appearance of things and the ideas we a priori have of them" (p. 45). For this purpose, it is therefore essential that pupils must be enabled to "[...] penetrate with greater lucidity a world full of complexities; a world subject to so many pseudo- or para-scientific assertions, to so many impostures of all kinds that it is important to know how to detect and if possible counter [...]" (Charpak et al., 2005, p. 215).

To this purpose, the aforementioned authors pose the following question: "Is it not of the utmost importance that children should be encouraged from a very early age to adopt an approach that fosters their curiosity, stimulates their imagination, develops their ability to reason, puts them in a research situation and thus makes them open to reflection, sensitive to argumentation and curious about everything around them?" (Charpak et al., 2005, p. 56).

Because it's not just a question of instructing and educating children in such a way that they merely repeat what they are told, so that they

practise *psittacism* (from the Greek *psittacos*, meaning the parrot) (La Borderie, 1991, p. 80); even if *psittacism* can nevertheless be useful as a first step to learn skills, abilities.

The purpose of instruction and education is to ensure that today's children become autonomous, thoughtful, emancipated individuals in adulthood (Hannoun, 1995, 1996; Charpentier, 2023) so to be fully capable of fitting into the present world and building the world of tomorrow (Freire, 2019). A world that we want to be above all democratic (Meirieu, 2020), supportive (Jankelevitch, 1984; Jacquard, 1999) and responsible (Morin, 1999a, 2014). A world in which we must necessarily consider the good of each individual and the good of all when we act (Ogien, 2007).

Considering this, we posit that the school subject of geography can and must be regarded as an opportunity and a motive for individual and collective reflection. It is a subject "that should be regarded as an incentive to question, observe, research, argue and express oneself, as well as a pretext for simply gathering knowledge [...]". (Charpak et al., 2005, p. 9). A school discipline that enables the pupils to learn (Astolfi, 1999), to give meaning to school, to what they learn and to the world around them (Develay, 1996), so that, if necessary, they can act on it today (Dewey, 1931) or tomorrow.

4. How to bring this adult into being?

The French educational system is characterised by its compulsory nature. Schools are special places because they admit people; in this case children, who have not always chosen to attend, who have not chosen the curriculum they will have to learn, and who do not always want to learn (Perrenoud, 2013).

Considering these circumstances, the system must strive to fulfil its obligations in accordance with ethical principles (Prairat, 2015; Meirieu, 2018), which are of paramount importance to any educator assuming responsibility for a classroom (Charpentier and Stoica, 2024, under review). This entails ensuring that pupils learn what is in their interests and in the interests of present and future society (Charpentier, 2023).

However, it must ensure that what is in their interest interests them (Charlot, 1999). This is a significant challenge, given that it is not possible to use every means to ensure that pupils learn what it is considered to be in their interest. The ideal of a teaching-learning situation is for pupils to put themselves voluntarily, freely, in "play", learning in the first person, in "I" (Meirieu, 2013, p. 174), because all learning is inherently first-person (Pastré, 2006).

In order for pupils to take an interest in what is in their interest, it is our contention, in line with Dewey (1931), that schools must offer pupils teaching that is relevant to the society around them, but also a teaching system that enables them to be fully involved in their own learning (Freinet, 1969). Under these conditions, this is not so much the quantity of activities offered to pupils throughout the day, the week, and so on that is crucial but rather the learning that pupils derived from them. This is a position supported by Francesch (2011) and Zavalloni (2022) in their promotion of a slow pedagogy, or to put it another way, a slow pace of learning.

In all cases, this learning should be an opportunity to enable pupils to develop a language. This language should be common to pupils and teachers, as well as to the society around them. But this learning should be also an opportunity to develop subject-specific languages, so that pupils can express their ideas, argue, justify, criticise and propose, and so that they can make themselves understood by their contemporaries (Bentolila, 2000, 2016, 2017).

It is therefore necessary to propose a curriculum and pedagogical system that enables pupils to make sense of the learning they will be doing (Astolfi, 1999), of the world around them, which we often take for granted without questioning it in order to understand it better and enter the learning process with confidence. This can be achieved by questioning it as simply as possible.

The objective is not, as Pascal Clerc demonstrated in 2002, "to bring the world into the classroom", but rather *to integrate the classroom into the world*, into the contemporary world, into the world in which pupils live on a daily basis, by maintaining as close a proximity to it as possible, because the human being is

ontologically a geographical being, as Joublot Ferré (2018) points out. A human being, whether we like it or not, in touch with space, potentially with the world, whether it is arranged or not, whether it is filled with artefacts or not. This space, this world are there, artefacts could be there also, but they can be looked at more closely, questioned to understand them better, perhaps to become an actor rather than a mere consumer, dependent on the way in which others have thought about them, authorised their use, and thought about them today and for tomorrow.

5. What are the aims of geography at primary school?

We postulate that school geography is one discipline among others; one that gives the pupils the opportunity to see, to question, to give meaning to the world around them, to take an informed look at it and if necessary to change it. Each discipline, whether university-based or school-based, employs its own languages, tools, methods and questioning.

Whether we like it or not, human beings are "spatial beings" from birth as Joublot Ferré (2018) has written. And, in the era of the Anthropocene (Joublot Ferré, 2023), human beings must deal today and perhaps more than ever before with the consequences or potential impacts of their own actions both on themselves and others, directly and indirectly and what can affect those closest to them spatially as well as those furthest away (Cook, 2004; Grataloup, 2017).

It is for all these reasons that we postulate that geography at school should include a section on geographical reasoning in addition to a part that could be devoted to a common culture consisting of knowledge of the Earth's spatial and geographical landmarks (continents, countries, oceans, seas, landmarks, etc.) and the characteristics of the Earth's space (climate, vegetation, settlement, etc.).

6. How can we question everyday objects, artefacts and facilities?

In France, it is becoming increasingly evident that pupils are being subjected to an array of objects, artefacts and facilities that permeate their daily lives, in and out of school.

These objects, artefacts, facilities and spaces that they interact with daily are rarely subjected to critical analysis or geographical reasoning.

And yet at school, pupils write with pencils and pens, on sheets of paper, on tables sitting on chairs. When they leave school, they walk along pavements and streets that may or may not be lit by streetlamps at night. For them to eat, many of their parents have to go to a shop.

These objects, these everyday artefacts, these facilities that they frequent most often without really seeing them, without really questioning them, can be the opportunity for a questioning approach to geography. The following examples illustrate this point.

At school, pupils usually write in exercise books. Some exercise books composed of sheet of paper. These exercise textbooks offer the opportunity to raise several simple questions. Simple questions that can have a geographical sense. These include the following: What are these sheets made of? How are they made? Who makes them? What is the raw material used to make them? Where are they bought? How do they get to the shops?

These are seemingly simple questions, yet they can lead to a multitude of further geographical inquiries that help to comprehend the intricacies of our lives and the ways in which they are organised by people other than ourselves. Such inquiries can provide insight into the decisions that others have made for us, particularly those pertaining to geography.

If we return to the questions asked: what are the pages of the pupils' exercise books composed of? One of the initial queries that can be readily posed concerns the composition of the exercise books. What is the nature of this material? One might inquire as to whether the material is paper pulp. Is the pulp derived from trees? It would be beneficial to ascertain the type of trees from which this paper pulp is derived but also the geographical location of the trees from which the pulp is derived. And what environmental conditions are conducive to the growth of this type of tree?

Other questions follow on from the first: Who makes the sheets of paper on which the pupils write? Are the notebooks and sheets used in class made by the parents? If not, who makes them? And where are they bought? These seemingly trivial questions lead to complex answers, particularly in terms of geography.

These questions require pupils to engage in a process of inquiry, whereby they must look for clues, search for information, consult documentation, atlases, Internet sites, and other sources to locate the places where these objects are produced, processed, and marketed. In doing so, they must validate the hypotheses raised by the presence of these objects and facilities.

Depending on the age of the pupils, the teacher may provide documentation if necessary. The process of cross-referencing the hypotheses and the information found will provide an opportunity for the pupils to develop a geographical view and reasoning about the world around them. This will include an examination of the areas where the raw materials used are found, the production areas, the need to mobilise energy, means of transport, equipment to get products from one place to another, the skills required to design these objects, the means of communication to find a recipient for them, the costs, the distances, and so forth. It is therefore necessary to take account of a wide range of factors when thinking geographically.

And this line of reasoning can give rise to a critical view of the everyday offerings available to all, which in turn allows for the formulation comparisons, of alternative proposals, the consideration of alternative options. In short, it allows for an intellectual process of reflection and argument based on geographical reasoning.

From this perspective, *it is evident that it is not so much the world that enters the classroom as the classroom that enters the world*. It is the classroom that is situated within the world. Consequently, it is the pupils, grappling with this concrete world, who can engage in a reflective process based on what is closest to them, the most familiar and yet often the least questioned.

7. Questioning objects and artefacts to enable pupils to play a full part in their own learning

It is important to recognise that the world in which our pupils live is complex (Morin, 2005, 2014). To the pupils to gain an understanding of this complex world and to be able to enter society, we think it is necessary to question them, to know the problems and questions that they must respond to (Dewey, 1931). Furthermore, to engage pupils in a geographical point of view on the world, we think also it is important to offer them devices that can interest them, so that they can take an interest and invest themselves in learning (Freinet, 1969). To imbue their learning with meaning (Develay, 1996), we think it is of benefit to initiate instruction as closely as possible to the pupils' immediate environment. We think it would be relevant to begin with what is most familiar to them, what they perceive to be the most self-evident. However, it is important to recognise that nothing is truly self-evident in our society, given that humanity is continually leaving its mark on the Earth, proposing technical devices, consumer products and developments. These objects, artefacts and facilities are, in fact and by their very presence, an invitation to think and to engage himself in critical thinking. They are also an invitation to consider the society that is available to pupils and that they have not particularly thought about. By questioning objects, artefacts, facilities and non-amenities, pupils can gain a deeper understanding of the society in which they live and the organisation of that society. It enables them to give meaning to what surrounds them, to become aware of what has been done, could be done, could be redone, undone, done differently, thought differently and to become aware, if necessary, of the potential for action and change.

Eventually, questioning these objects, artefacts and facilities would enable students to enter fully into a geographical discourse, a discourse that they could then produce with their own resources, considering the argument put forth by La Borderie (1991) that:

"There is always a difficulty and a pleasure in understanding and learning. The pleasure comes from taking control of the environment,

the difficulty comes from constantly questioning our representations. Nothing is simply added to; all new knowledge is added to, questioned and restructured. Pupils tirelessly produce their own knowledge and their own capacity for symbolisation" (La Borderie, 1991, p. 140).

But this challenge in acquiring knowledge can only be surmounted through direct, first-person learning, as La Borderie posits:

"Doing is not just about mastering the activity at a later stage; it is one of the ways of knowing: doing in order to know. This is what the old adage says: 'Practice makes perfect'. Doing as an instrument of both know-how and knowledge. This is what we call the pedagogy of the blacksmith" (p. 95).

Asking pupils about their immediate surroundings is a challenging and time-consuming, and for some it may be a little difficult. But as La Borderie reminds us:

"Shouldn't we also learn to do things at school? Learning to work, to produce? To learn about the subject and its constraints, and not just what is said about it" (*idem*, p. 95).

It would be beneficial to consider the possibility of incorporating learning objectives that extend beyond the acquisition of knowledge into the educational curriculum. For instance, it would be valuable to include activities that foster the development of practical skills, such as the ability to work independently and to produce tangible outcomes. Additionally, it would be advantageous to introduce learning objectives that encourage students to engage with the subject matter in a critical manner, rather than merely absorbing information presented by others.

In this context of learning, the pupils' productions become central to the teaching-learning relationship. La Borderie (1991) argues in this sense, writing:

"It is not possible to discuss the activity, the work of pupils, and therefore their profession, without questioning the place that pupils' production occupies in the educational act, and therefore the way in which we consider and deal with the mistakes that they will necessarily make" (*idem*, p. 135).

The language used by pupils in their productions, whether drawings, diagrams, oral or written, provides an opportunity for them to engage in communication with the teacher and their peers. Knowing however that, to enter dialogue, this communication is dependent on the receiver of a message being able to understand the intended meaning of the sender. But the difficulty of the communication is that certain words can have multiple meanings, and that the interpretation of a message can vary depending on the context and the individual receiving it. This highlights the need to reduce the most possible the referential gap between sense of the message that can exist between the receiver and the sender of messages (Jakobson, 1963; La Borderie, 1991).

8. Conclusion

Geography is still taught in France as part of the primary school curriculum, but teachers often find it challenging to teach and many pupils find it challenging to learn. Geography syllabuses currently combine two objectives: the sharing of a common culture, which includes nomenclatures of places, physical and human characteristics of France, Europe, the world, the Earth, and themes, which are often presented in an analytical way, to enable pupils to better understand the world around them without, however, offering a synthetic view of it.

To alleviate these problems, another approach to teaching geography at primary school could be proposed: a geography that focus on the everyday lives of pupils, from what surrounds them, to question artefacts, urban planning and non-developments in order to learn languages from them, to use geographical tools and methods to better understand their presence, the reason for their presence but also if necessary new ways of thinking about their presence.

Ultimately, this proposal assumes that it would be interesting and beneficial for pupils to question what we or they no longer question, what is nonetheless very close to everyone in our society, on what is self-evident because it is always present and yet could be a source of questions, of knowledge and geographical reasoning.

The aim is to encourage pupils to be informed people, to become people who observe the world around them with a critical eye and not just as consumers of knowledge, artefacts and urban planning, people who live in the world without thinking about it.

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